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ABSTRACT

In order to demonstrate how course content can be adapted so that thinking skills are included in the learning experience, this paper uses a unit of study from theater history as a basis for examining how subject matter can be structured with learning objectives, a study guide, a hypothetical problem situation, instructions, and feedback. The process follows a guided design procedure for solving an open-ended problem using student groups as "think tanks" for decision-making. The described procedure to be followed includes seven points: Learning Objectives (which guides the selection of materials and procedures to be used in the classroom instruction); Study Guide (which provides students with sources of content material); Hypothetical Problem Situation (which adapts content material to the decision-making process using an open-ended problem); Instructions and Feedbacks (which provide guidelines for solving the problem); Narrowing Down and Noticing Techniques (which uses the hypothetical problem to narrow down the study of a body of material, and make the problem the center of thinking in order to devise the scheme of instructions and feedbacks); Application of Principles (which provides practice for students in recognizing stated principles); and Evaluation (which requires students to reflect on their work and decide if their research and recommendations resulted in an acceptable solution). (DJR)

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GUIDED DESIGN AS A THINK TANK STRATEGY FOR TEACHING COURSE CONTENT

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INTRODUCTION

The process of decision-making has been well explained as a procedure to solve open-ended problems. In Professional Decision-Making by Wales, Nardi and Stager four operations of decision-making, namely, State the Goal, Generate Ideas, Prepare a Plan, and Take Action, are explained in detail with meaningful examples. In each of these operations three modes of thinking (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) are followed while progressing toward a best possible solution. The questions "Who is involved?; What is involved?; What happened?; When did it happen?;" and, "How serious was it?" help to define the situation and identify the problem to be solved.

To use this process as a tool for teaching course content requires commitment to the preparation of units of subject matter so that facts, assumptions, and opinions can be organized for group discussion. In so doing both subject matter and thinking skills can be learned and put to use.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how course content can be adapted so that thinking skills are included in the learning experience. A unit of study from theatre history is used as a basis for examining how subject matter can be structured with learning objectives, study guide, a hypothetical problem situation, instructions and feedbacks. The process follows a Guided Design procedure for solving an open-ended problem using student groups as "think tanks" for decision-making. The Guided Design structure allows students to acquire knowledge of Greek theatre while applying thinking skills.

The example used here is taken from a course in theatre history but the method used is typical of decision-making procedures which can apply to other academic disciplines. Decision-making is not limited to the natural sciences and this example shows how it can apply to a course in the humanities. The title of the problem is "What's Funny." It was published in its complete form by the University Press of America along with other Guided Design problems in Think Tank Theatre, 1984. This problem was used for a unit study in ancient Greek comedy using Aristophanes' play The Clouds as the primary source.

Basically, the procedure to be followed breaks down into seven parts. These parts might also apply to units of study in other disciplines such as literature, history, music, art, classics or other humanities subjects. The seven parts to be considered here are: Learning Objectives, Study Guide, Hypothetical Problem Situation, Instructions and Feedbacks, Narrowing Down and Noticing Techniques, Application of Principles, and Evaluation.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

One reason why students flounder in the midst of reading assignments, lectures, and discussions is that information, though abundant, is not put to use. It is assumed that facts, assumptions,

and opinions will be assimilated and that this will constitute the learning experience. However, if the information cannot be made relevant it is of little value.

Learning objectives guide the selection of materials and procedures to be used in the classroom instruction. Davis, Alexander, and Yelon, in Learning System Design, define a learning objective as "a description of the behavior expected of a learner after instruction." What is the student expected to be able to do once the unit of study has been completed? In our example in which students are to study ancient Greek comedy the learning objectives are stated as follows:

1. To explain the origin and basic nature of ancient comedy.
2. To understand selected principles of verbal and visual humor from Aristophanes.
3. To identify selected techniques for acting a comic role.
4. To compare ancient comedy to contemporary comedy.

Of these four, number one, three, and four can be tested because they imply an action which students should be able to perform. The second objective "to understand" is more ambiguous and suggests a state of mind rather than a behavior. To incorporate action into the objective one might change the word "understand" to "select" principles of humor and apply them to a specific example from Aristophanes' play. This would then be an action which could be tested once the problem has been completed.

STUDY GUIDE

The study guide is a way of providing students with common sources of content material. The sources should be attainable and readily available so that study outside the classroom becomes a very real investigation of sources other than the textbook. It helps to motivate the gathering of information which will be used in the classroom. It is a way, also, of indicating that there are both primary and secondary sources and some of them may be audio and visual in addition to the usual printed word.

The study guide for "What's Funny" includes a classical play The Clouds by Aristophanes as the primary source, three essays (secondary sources) about the nature of Greek comedy, a commercially recorded lecture about this play presented by Kenneth Cavender, an academic authority on the subject, and a suggested reference to an historical source which includes many photographs of ancient statues, masks, and paintings which provide visual information about the ancient comedic traditions.

HYPOTHETICAL PROBLEM SITUATION

This step in adapting content material to the decision-making process is a crucial one, and perhaps the most difficult one to construct. The problem should be open-ended. It should be a problem that requires

a search for information, has alternative possibilities, and one that has no simple right or wrong answers.

In the case of "What's Funny" it was decided that the problem should be one the students could identify with easily because the play to be studied is remote from their experience in literature as well as theatre. It assumes that there is a Greek Club on campus which has decided to celebrate an ancient tradition by performing one of Aristophanes' plays, The Clouds, as part of an annual festival. A fictional character, Telly Kepros, is introduced. He is a new initiate to the Club. He has been cast in the role of the son, Pheidippides. Telly knows little about acting or about Greek Comedy so the problem becomes his problem. He must find out what is funny about Greek comedy and what techniques might be applied to his own performance. He does this by investigating and analyzing the play, the essays and other resource material. And he consults a "semi-retired" professional actor who gives his point of view and advice.

The students of theatre history, then, identify with Telly Kepros and, in groups of five to seven, they collectively proceed with the series of instructions and feedbacks. With a little imagination it is possible to invent hypothetical situations which require group discussion and decision-making to enhance investigation and analysis of drama, literature, case studies in law, historical information, social or political problems, musical or artistic compositions, foreign

language problems, and other concerns in the humanities.

INSTRUCTIONS AND FEEDBACKS

The instructions and feedbacks provide the guidelines for solving the problem. They follow the decision-making steps although the sequence may vary depending on the nature of the problem. Student groups respond to an instruction before they read a professional feedback. In this way they do their own thinking and are provided a comparison with a professional point of view.

Steps followed in this problem were as follows:

INSTRUCTION A - State the Problem.

FEEDBACK A - State the Problem: Telly's problem is, "What approach should I take to enable me to interpret and perform the role from this ancient comedy to the best of my ability?"

INSTRUCTION B - Establish Objectives.

FEEDBACK B - Objectives.

1. To explain the origin and basic nature of ancient comedy.
2. To be able to state selected principles of verbal and visual humor.
3. To identify selected techniques for acting in a comic role.

INSTRUCTION C - Gather Information, the Storyline.

FEEDBACK C - Summary of the Story.

INSTRUCTION D - Analyze Humor, Visual and Verbal.

FEEDBACK D - Examples of Visual and Verbal Humor from the Play.

INSTRUCTION E - Gather Information, Principles of Humor.

FEEDBACK E - Principles of Humor from the Essays.

INSTRUCTION F - Gather Information, Personal Experiences of What
is Funny.

FEEDBACK F - Examples of Humor from Everyday Experiences.

INSTRUCTION G - Generate Possible Solutions, Acting Style, Voice,
Action, Characterization, Costumes.

FEEDBACK G - Possible Solutions for Acting Style from Telly's
Research and Interview with Professional Actor.

INSTRUCTION H - Evaluate the Solution.

FEEDBACK H - Evaluation. The Advice Obtained is Feasible, Practical,
Safe, Economical, Moral.

NARROWING DOWN AND NOTICING TECHNIQUES

Some of the above instructions and feedbacks provide what D.N. Perkins in The Mind's Best Work calls "narrowing down" and "noticing techniques." The hypothetical problem, itself, is a way of narrowing down the study of a body of material. Adapting material to be used for a decision-making process is creative activity and it is refreshing to make problems the center of thinking in order to devise the scheme of instructions and feedbacks. Problem finding becomes the task of the instructor. It helps

provide focus for the learning objectives and the path of problem solving for students.

The story is summarized in Feedback C to tie individual scenes together and give the play a through-line. The imaginary professional actor relates the story after the students have made their own attempt to follow the main characters from the initial scene to the conclusion. In the opening scene it is revealed that the son, Pheidippides, is squandering his father's money by betting on the horses. The father, Strepsiades, claims that his wife has spoiled the boy and now a "galloping consumption" has caught up to the family fortunes leaving the "old man" in debt. To solve this problem Strepsiades attempts to send the son to a school where "Worse Logic" is taught. This is the kind of study that allows students to learn how to talk their way out of anything and thereby become successful. The plan does not succeed because the son refuses to give up his penchant for gambling, so the father decides to enter school himself. This is where he confronts Socrates in a ridiculous classroom situation and though bewildered he is willing to take Socrates' advice no matter how absurd it may seem. The story is interrupted by a long discourse in which Aristophanes boasts of the high quality of his plays compared to other playwrights and on the bumbling ways of Athenians. There is a debate between two characters named Right Logic and Wrong Logic in which the latter declares himself the winner. When the son finally is persuaded to go to this school

he successfully completes the course in Wrong Logic and as a result gives his father a beating as revenge for all the beatings he took as a child. Strepsiades sets fire to the school. A chorus of Clouds which has been commenting on events along the way finally compliments itself for being such a fair judge of the situation.

Perkins, in a chapter entitled "Ways of the Mind," demonstrates how "visual search" and "noticing" function in creative thinking. In the analysis of visual and verbal humor in The Clouds students probably would not notice examples unless given the target. But once they know what to look for after reading the play they can scan with considerable efficiency to find examples in the text. Narrowing down and noticing help to establish a pattern of recognition. Examples of visual humor include a female chorus of Clouds acted by males in masks, Socrates suspended in a basket over his students, a prime student who looks "half-dead," exaggerated physical features in the costumes and masks of the main actors, farcical beatings and other physical manifestations having to do with fertility rites. Verbal humor can be found in puns or ludicrous comparisons. Strepsiades says "...that Heaven is one vast fire-extinguisher Placed round about us, and that we're the cinders." Socrates in his teaching compares thunder to bowel rumblings. Strepsiades mistakes the statement of Socrates that there is only a vortex of winds on top of Mount Olympus, not Zeus, to mean that Vortex is the name of a new god who has ousted Zeus.

APPLICATION OF PRINCIPLES

Davis, Alexander, and Yelon distinguish principles from concepts. In the structure of knowledge, concepts are combined into principles, but a principle is not simply a number of concepts linked in the same sentence. "A principle states a relationship between classes of events which enable us to: (1) predict consequences; (2) explain events; (3) infer causes; (4) control situations; and (5) solve problems." (Davis, Alexander, Yelon, p. 231). Very often students lack practice in recognizing stated principles as well as experience in applying them to hypothetical or real life situations. In "What's Funny" they are required to pick out principles of humor from the assigned essays. Then they are asked to apply them to examples of humor in the play and also to examples of humor from their own life experiences.

For example, in "The Comic View" by Barnet, Berman and Burto, a principle states, "Comedy is thus frequently critical of the individual; it accepts as valid the codes of society, and is amused to see individuals set themselves up as exceptional." In The Clouds Aristophanes ridicules Socrates, the great teacher, by suspending him in a basket while he watches over a school full of scrawny, grovelling students.

EVALUATION

At the conclusion of this hypothetical problem students who have

followed the decision-making process know what the Greeks considered to be funny in The Clouds; they know what they consider to be funny in their own lives; they are aware of the origins of Greek comedy; and they have discovered certain techniques for comedic acting. The four operations outlined by Wales, Nardi, and Stager in Professional Decision-Making have been followed. Namely, a goal statement was made, ideas were generated, a plan was prepared, and action was taken. The modes of thinking - analysis, synthesis, and evaluation have taken place although probably not in the tightly ordered way recommended by these authors. The evaluation step in "What's Funny" asks students to reflect on their work and decide to what extent their research and recommendations resulted in a solution that was feasible, economical, safe, practical, and moral.

Adapting the subject of Greek comedy to the decision-making process provided a way for students to identify with the historical context, to make the principles involved relevant to their own lives, and a way to experience thinking skills while researching and discussing aspects of ancient Greek comedy.

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